

us in pieces by leslie057

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Summary:

no ending; tumblr fics that i don't want to stand alone. (usually from prompts.)

1. áoyè

áoyè: to pull an all-nighter

Her vision unfocuses as she stares at the thin sheet of paper in her lap, its soft fibres worn from her scrubbing and scrubbing at it, white shreds of eraser left behind as proof of her absolute hopelessness.

She can't think, she can't write. She can't begin to understand why her professor assigned a seven page paper in the last week of school.

What she *does* know is her current arrangement isn't working, and she desperately needs a change of scenery. It's not like she will be sleeping tonight, anyway.

She scoops one or two books up into an arm and stuffs her pencil into the front of her khaki shorts, tucked into the leftover space of the button loop. Passing by the Panasonic on her way out, she pushes down on the pause button, killing the guitar strums of a Stevie Nicks single.

Outside, it's pitch black. She wanders more than she walks along the pavement, making slow movements. Partly because she doesn't want to get back to work and partly because it feels so nice out. It's a hot May night but there's wind coming through, and she assumes it's the kind of night where every couple in the city is down by the woods or something. Sacrificing privacy to hook up at the lake.

And here she is. Sacrificing her sanity.

When she finally reaches the student union, she pulls open the heavy door and walks inside. It's dark except for a few dull banker's lamps, and she thinks it's unusual (but not a bad thing) that she has the building all to herself.

She comes to a second door, the one leading to a hall of meeting rooms. It's a practiced routine of hers. Go down and take a right, then the next right, and find the first room on the left. It's by far the widest room and it has the nicest seats, a big ceiling fan, the most windows. Only she can't *get* to the hall. When she pulls on the handle, the heavy wood doesn't budge.

She tries the door across from it and has no luck there, either.

Hugging her papers to her chest, she turns to examine the main area. Far away, just against the back wall, someone is sitting in a chair. It's at a diagonal, so she would almost be able to make out his profile, but his back is facing her.

"Hey," she calls out, "do you know why these doors are locked?"

The silhouette doesn't acknowledge her, instead bowing his head. He's concentrating on something.

"Hey!" she near-shouts, frustration helping her voice catch hold.

He leans back in his chair, tipping his head to one side. As if he doesn't have time for her. Doesn't care about her multi page paper (which is a rough draft at best and worked around a thesis that she just feels like scrapping altogether, but that's beside the point).

With a dramatic *huff*, she's leaving. She would rather go back to being cooped up in her room than stay here with some jackass—and not even in her favorite study place.

Though, dramatics usually get her nowhere. As she rounds the corner, forcefully tugging her bag's strap higher up her shoulder, the heavy thing in question swings over a table, wiping it clean of a lamp. With the help of her hip, it knocks down some books off the edge, too. No, not books. *Textbooks*.

The large space echoes with thuds and sounds of breaking glass.

"Shit," she hisses and crouches down. She drops her bag and papers, beginning to fill her arms up with the books. She deposits them onto the shelving unit and returns to the mess below, bright shards of glass sprinkled across the floor.

She tries to sweep up the pieces into her hand and then hears it: "Hey, you okay?"

From the entrance, she watches the silhouette become less of one, soft yellow light starting to show his features to her while he approaches.

Upon recognizing him, the anger crackling under her skin immediately cools.

“Jonathan?”

“Hey, Nancy,” he says and kneels beside her.

With a palmful of glass, she freezes. Gapes at him like he’s an alien as he helps clean up. She’s always known he was at IU but never actually seen him here.

The last time they spoke was senior year, but they first met a long time ago. Kindergarten, even. She can’t remember a time when they *weren’t* in each other’s orbit, but she also doesn’t know if there was ever a point where they could have become friends. He isolated himself. Even more so after his brother got sick. He loved to be alone. She knew that much.

Still, she had a small obsession with him then. She went through a few boyfriends in high school, but she never felt a gravitation towards them that paralleled the unduly strong feelings she held for him. An effective stranger.

For years, she would take the seat behind him in the honors classes they shared and let her imagination run. She would study his movements, memorize his clothing, wonder about the late nights he spent with Will in the hospital. Ache to look through his photographs and get a taste of his personality, which he kept so deeply hidden. There had to be something he liked apart from being by himself.

For years, imagining was enough. Sort of.

But she hasn't stopped thinking about him. Even if they have no classes together in college.

How could the jackass who just ignored her be the sweet guy she thought Jonathan Byers was? She figures she should give him a hard time. So much for crushes.

Dropping some triangles of glass into the trash, she says, "Look, it's nice and all, but I really don't need your help."

"Oh. Sorry, I just thought—"

"Which you know, I don't know why you didn't want to offer me any help before. It's not like it would have been that much trouble," she grumbles.

"What?"

"We don't need to pretend to be friendly now, though. It's never been that way, anyway." Her motions turn careless because of her temper, and she cuts her palm on the glass. Red trickles down her hand. She curses aloud.

“Woah, uh...do you...should I find the first aid kit or something?”

She rises from the mostly clean floor, and he copies her, broad brows knitted together. She gathers her things and delights in shunning him.

“Okay, um. I’m just gonna go back to studying then. I’m really sorry for...I don’t know, exactly.”

She rolls her eyes, wiping blood onto her recently bought shirt before she can think it through. He starts to walk away when she spies something on the table.

“Forgot your walkman, genius.”

He spins around, making the realization. Ready to get back to her room, she pushes on the door’s crash bar with her shoulder and takes no notice of the thanks he mutters.

Then something clicks in her brain.

“Oh, my god,” she blurts. She eases off the door, causing it to slam back into its frame loudly.

“What now?” he says, letting irritation rough up his voice a little.

“Did you,” she gestures to the headphones, “have those in earlier?”

“Are you mad at me for that, too?”

Her heart’s in her stomach, heavy and hard. “No! No, I’m so sorry. When I came in, I was just asking you why all the doors were locked. I didn’t realize you couldn’t hear me, I thought you were...being an asshole.”

“Oh.”

“Fuck, I’m...embarrassed. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he shrugs, headphones around his neck, “there are some rooms on the 3rd floor that are never locked. If you want, I can show you.”

She agrees, planning to be as polite as she can be now that she’s made such a horrific first impression. She’s not as insecure as her teenage self, but every time she slips up these days, it’s hard to quiet the voice in her head telling her she’s not sophisticated, mature, *sweet* enough. It sounds a lot like her mother. Sharp and feminine and critical and nasal.

This is why she never goes home.

She steps over to the elevator a few feet away, and when he stands

next to her, she finds she's nervous.

"So what's keeping you up?" she asks tentatively.

Attention on his white high-tops, he deliberates the answer for a second. "It's my final. Nursing science."

Jonathan? In the medical field? That's news to her, but intriguing news. She's barely visited Hawkins in the past two years, and she considers it beneath her dignity to hound Mike with questions about his friend's big brother. But she's offended by the fact that she doesn't get updates and never has.

She buries her slight shock and walks inside. "That's cool," she says.

"What about you?"

"I have an essay. For my english class. It was assigned Monday and it's, like, 4000 words so...I'm going a little crazy

"Wow," he breathes and shifts his weight, "I definitely couldn't do that."

"Don't like writing?"

“Not really.”

“Yeah, I get it. For me, it’s just the only way I can really clear my head. I like how it makes you sort your thoughts and everything. I have a lot of those. But, this week, we had no time to think about the paper really, so it’s stressful. And, you know, my mom didn’t even want me to go to college. Then I got a scholarship, and she stopped forcing her opinion on me. So...I’m here. English is my major, but I have no idea what kind of job I’ll really want later. All I know is this paper is so big but, for some reason, I see no incentive for finishing it...”

Before she can continue, they hear a creaking noise, or crunching, like metal parts rubbing against each other. “That doesn’t...sound right,” she states the obvious.

“No,” he says.

“We stopped.”

“...yeah.”

“Why did we stop? Are we even on the 3rd floor? Shouldn’t—”

“Just,” he presses down on the open door button and holds it, “hold on.”

She takes a deep breath and gingerly places her notebook on the floor. She knows talking would keep her calm, but she's already said so much. For every dozen words that leave her mouth, it's like he only has one to say. He's concise. Quiet. Maybe that doesn't have to do with her, but how can she be sure?

"It's not working?" she asks before she can help it.

"No. I actually...I don't know, maybe we're between floors."

"Oka-ay," she says and crosses her arms. Leans her weight on the panels behind her. While he experiments with the various call buttons, a bell begins to ring. A good sign. She takes the opportunity to really look at him.

He's how she remembers him mostly. Tall but not overly so. Kind of thin. His hair isn't much shorter but styled a little differently. It's a tidy mess on his head, hanging over his forehead a bit but not in his eyes. It swoops to one side, long on top, less long on the sides and tapers into a short tail of hair at the nape of his neck that she wants to touch. His eyebrows are sharp, his jaw even sharper. But as for his eyes, that's a different story. There's a softness there, like his lips. His lips have interested her since the tenth grade.

Speaking of, his shirt she recognizes from high school. A dark blue one, and it may fit tighter than it used to, but she won't complain. His jeans are not so familiar but look worn and grey. It works on him, and he looks really nice. He *is* really nice. However, she's a horrible person. At least that's the reputation she's just made for herself.

Over the speaker, a woman's voice finally comes through between the machine's hisses. "You've reached emergency services."

"Hi, uh, we're in the student center at IU and our elevator is...stuck, I think it's...it may be stopped between floors. But it could just be the doors, though."

"Okay, at the university you said?"

"Yeah, Indianapolis."

The operator asks him a few questions, tells him she'll call to get a technician to them, then: "It should be within the next hour or so."

With a confused expression, he glances at her, and she's being pulled back down to earth. Did she just say an hour?

"O...kay. Um, thank you, then," he manages without sounding too startled.

The speaker's fizzing fades, leaving them in silence.

"Why would you say that?!"

"Say what?"

She groans and sits down on the floor. “You were way too nice to her.”

He follows, but doesn’t get close, sitting with one leg bent. “I don’t know what you would have wanted me to say to her.”

“That it’s...you know, it’s bullshit,” her tone playfully edges on hysterical, “and if it’s gonna take over an hour to get a technician to us, he’d better be like the best fucking technician in the world or...Tom Cruise. I don’t know.” That pulls a soft laugh from him and then from her.

“Next time maybe you should do the talking.”

“That’s all I’m saying,” she says, teasing more. “Hey, I’m sorry again for earlier. I didn’t mean to lash out at you. I’m not usually like that. I promise I’m not.”

“You already apologized. It’s okay.”

“This week has made me crazy.”

Absentmindedly, he plays with his walkman, tracing the edges with his fingertips. “Well, you have your paper with you, at least.”

“Oh, no,” she frowns, “you don’t have your stuff to study with. I’m sorry, this is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not. Besides, I’ve been studying for hours. I think I tend to overdo it. Because of nerves, I guess.”

She drags her notebook into her lap. “Why are you so nervous?”

He presses his lips together into a fine line, works his jaw. “It’s...I just need my GPA as high as it can be. And classes like these—I need to have impressive grades in them. Really impressive. It’s the only way I’ll get into a good program.”

She flips until she finds the page she’s looking for, taking a moment to glance at him shyly from beneath her thin bangs. “Nursing program?”

“Yeah.”

She hums. “What about your camera?”

He finally looks at her, so she doesn’t hide. Doesn’t look away. Something about his eyes staying on her awakens the long dormant swarm of butterflies at the pit of her stomach, and they’re flitting around everywhere now. Reaching as high as her heart and her neck, even.

“What about it?”

“Come on, I know how good you are at taking pictures.”

“I couldn’t for a job,” he says, cautious. “Besides, I’ve been around a sick person my whole life. I guess this feels like the natural thing for me.”

“Well, what about med school? You might as well go all the way and be a doctor,” she jokes.

“No, I couldn’t. Med school is, um, not something I can do.” There’s obviously a story there. Against temptation, she won’t pry. They technically just met. Well, not at all. Kind of.

With an impatient sigh, she checks her watch. 1:00 am. “How long do you think we’ve been in here?”

He turns his own wrist as she had. “...it’s been four minutes.” He says it almost apologetically.

God, four minutes can stretch itself out to go on for miles when you don’t know someone enough that silence is comfortable but feel like you would enjoy hours of silence if it meant being next to them. Come to think of it, she is enjoying this a little bit too much. She can think of worse people to be stuck in a tiny room with.

She swallows her pride and shoves a paper at him. “Read this,” she orders.

While he begins to gently decline, she picks up his walkman. “Come on, even if you don’t like to write, you’ll be able to tell me if it’s shit or not.” She tugs the cassette out of the tape deck. “What do you have on this?”

“It-it’s written on there.”

Ceremony- New Order

Warszawa- David Bowie

Lazy Calm- Cocteau Twins

Nocturnal Me- Echo and the Bunnymen

Perfect Circle- R.E.M

Stories of Old- Depeche Mode

She knows a few of the bands, knows of Bowie for sure. But the songs themselves, like him, are a mystery.

It can’t be worse than when her last boyfriend put ‘Like a Virgin’ on a tape for them to have sex to.

She unplugs the headphones and hits play. He looks troubled, frankly, that she would touch his player—or listen to it, for that matter. Yet he says nothing, silently reading through her work.

The first song is resonant and one that she deems sad though there is nothing inherently bleak about it. It's compelling either way; what's also compelling are the visions she gets of him listening to it and the ideas that branch off from there. Does he ever have it on when he's driving? Where does he drive to? Maybe home on the weekends or maybe places she has no clue exist. Does he listen in the shower? She doesn't ever have her stereo on for that, but she has decided something about this music makes it a good companion to hot mist and soapy skin and...now she's only thinking of him in the shower.

She has never had such indecent thoughts about a stranger before.

Though 'stranger' is starting to strike her as the wrong word for him. Her attraction to him doesn't flow from someplace random. They may not be close, but she's learned some things about him over the years. If anything, he is magnetic because of how much he cares about things. How loyal he is to his family and how he protects them. If there's another living person who loves as cosmically as him, she completely doubts it.

A paper being placed in her hands hauls her head from the clouds.

"I can't believe you can write like that."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I like to read, but I would read more if everything was yours. If it sounded like that."

She can practically feel the deep shade of pink spreading over her face. “You know, I was hoping for some actual criticism.”

“I’m really not the person for that, Nancy.”

“Come on, there has to be something.”

He slides his player closer to himself, lowering the volume some. “There’s nothing.”

She shrugs her cardigan off, a light coat of sweat on her bare shoulders. “Let me get this straight. You’re studying to be a nurse, and you have nothing to say about my paper on the connection between physical health and mental health.”

“I don’t know, maybe you misspelled ‘psychiatric.’”

She shakes her head fondly. “You’re impossible. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Will does.”

Her flirtatious smile fades into something tamer. His body has tensed up. She knows she shouldn’t stare, but she can’t stop looking at him. His presence is hypnotic almost. His dark eyes won’t land on her.

Eventually, she speaks. “How is he?”

“He’s not doing any worse, which is good. He’s not doing better. But he’s not doing worse.”

There’s a different kind of tension between them now. She’s getting the strangest urge to reach over and hug him. To distract herself, she picks up her sweater from her lap and begins folding it, hand brushing his for a second. The pads of her fingers are electrified. Suddenly she gets an idea that is either dumb or really dumb. Unsure if she’s about to overstep a line, she winces at herself. God, this paper is not going to write itself.

“Would you...mind if I used him in my essay? As an example? I mean, if not, I understand. But I would really love to hear more about him.”

They talk for a long time about Will. She learns so much. So much that her own brother could have told her, had she asked. She learns that last year, on his birthday, the doctors said he might not live to be older than thirty. She learns that his condition is so rare and complicated that scientists are trying to develop an entirely new medicine for it.

Before she knows it, she has two pages of notes written, front and back.

“Look at this,” she laughs quietly and flips her papers over so he can

see how much she wrote. The black cursive letters are smudged and running into each other. "It really is so amazing. Your brother's story. More than I ever realized."

"Yeah," he agrees. As he takes a deep breath, she feels the warm air on her neck. Were they sitting this close before?

"Not that it's a story. Sorry, I didn't mean to say it like that. But he is amazing."

"I know what you meant." His voice is low, serious. She didn't make him upset, did she?

"And thank you, so much. This is definitely going to save my grade."

He moves his walkman to the other side of him, music still playing low and slow. If she scooted over just a few inches, her knee might touch him. "Well, I should thank you, too. I don't really ever talk about this stuff with anyone. It's not as hard as I thought."

He doesn't talk about it with anyone. Anyone but her. Should that make her feel special? Because it really really does. There are other things she wishes he would do with her and not anyone else. "Maybe we could do this again sometime, then." She crosses her arms over herself and looks away. She's sweaty but slightly cold, and there is the weirdest burning sensation building in her middle. It's probably because she needs sleep. Or because they're running out of oxygen. Or she's already fallen in love with him. One of the three.

“Do this again?”

“Oh, well,” she messes with her hair, “not exactly this.”

“Yeah. Not this.”

His response confuses her. The way he says it. Is he uncomfortable? Waiting to get away from her? As if he notices her offense, he explains himself. “I mean, I’m just sick of being stuck like this.”

She still has nothing to say. All she can think of is how attracted she is to him and how scared she is of what he’s attempting to tell her.

“Not...stuck with you. Um, well, I am stuck with you—we are—but sick. I’m not sick of you.”

It’s stupid, but her feelings are hurt. She can’t tell if he’s nervous or feels bad for her, trying to cover what he said. When they do finally get out of the elevator, what if he never speaks to her again? She can’t help but think he might believe the rumors about her from high school. That she’s slutty, shallow, that she can’t—

Why is he right next to her? She’s just turned her head and he’s *there*. Right there, his nose a few inches away from hers. Gasping, she looks to his mouth. His lip trembles just barely. Her heart seems to stop working for a moment, clogged with fresh, strong, warm anticipation.

In a whisper, he finishes his thought. "I'm not sick of you."

The second his fingers touch her jaw, she shivers, closing the distance between them before it kills her. She leans the side of her head on the wall behind them, breathing heavy as he gently draws her lip into his inviting mouth. They stay like that for a moment, to preserve the initial frailty that a first kiss has. When he does finally pull back she can tell shame is welling up in him.

"I shouldn't have—"

She doesn't let him voice his concerns. There's no reason for it. Instead, she grabs his wrists tight, forcing his hands to remain on her flushed face. She kisses him like she's confident, even if she's not. As surprised as she is about it all, there is no part of her that wants to stop. She can question it later, psychoanalyze their encounter like she does everything else in her life.

For now, she has what she wants. She shouldn't have prepared herself for the worst.

She pushes her loose leaf paper from her lap, shifting on the hard floor to get rid of the awkward space between their hips. She keeps shoving her knee at his thigh, unable to get close. She decides the only way to be comfortable is to be in front of him, not beside him. When she traps him between her legs, pressing in on both sides of his waist, it's like she does it every day. He does not appear to be scared, but a little confused nonetheless. To slow her down, he lets his large palm come down on her shoulder. He pulls up the thin strap of her shirt from where it had fallen down and leans his warm forehead on

hers.

As they take each other in, one thing is clear: neither of them are usually the type to go around kissing people in elevators.

But today, they feel different.

“I had no idea you liked me,” she says and cards her hand through his hair. It tickles her cut.

“I was trying to forget that I did.”

She kisses him again, hooking his top lip with her tongue, then biting it softly. She’s so red in the face, but it’s worth it, and she hasn’t scared him off yet. Which is what she thought would happen if she got too close to Jonathan Byers. “You’re starting to remember?”

He nods carefully. The back of his hand grazes her side.

Pulling all-nighters never used to be so eventful for her.

And when the technician does get there, she almost leaves her essay inside, too distracted by her new friend to realize the reason she was up so late in the first place.

2. offing

Notes for the Chapter:

takes place around 1987. the gate reopens for a bit.

sidenote: i don't condone sleeping on public beaches.
there are crabs. and it's illegal. but...this is is fic!

offing: the deep, distant stretch of the ocean that is still visible from the land

They've made it to Virginia Beach. Her clothes are spattered with blood, and a sludgy, unfamiliar substance is clinging to the ends of her short hair. To her gritty skin. She can't see herself, but she assumes the soft brown eyeliner she applied in the morning is smeared.

For three days they've been on the road now. From ghost town to ghost town. They didn't plan this.

When summer came, she went home to visit her parents. Her brother. She stood it for about a week before she called Jonathan and rode a train out to New Mexico. He had been visiting his family, too. That's when national news turned dark. It only took so many unexplained deaths for them to realize that officials were lying about it being a serial killer; if proof didn't exist yet, it never would.

Then, at breakfast one day, El admitted to him that she'd been playing with her powers again. It was the first time in two years, since she started school. She had tried her hardest to live life the *normal* way.

But, finally, something gave in her. Maybe it was just an intuition. Either way, she detected six monsters. All near the East Coast.

Jonathan didn't lie about it to his mom. The two of them *were* going on a road trip together.

"You okay?" he asks her.

She turns her head. He's waiting for her, holding open the passenger side door. His clothes are filthy, too. Though there's not much blood on him. His arms are a little sunburned, hair unkempt, but he's handsome as ever. Go figure.

"I'm okay," she says and steps out. "I'm always okay."

He takes the towel she was sitting on. Looks unconvinced by her promise.

"You're not really mad at me, are you?" she calls, hopeful, as he walks to the back of the car. He's getting something from the trunk.

"You scared me," he says.

A bit of regret distends in her, swelling like music. She has the worst taste in her mouth, either because he's disappointed in her or because

monster matter somehow got there. Shifting her weight, she tells him she's sorry.

Gently, he shuts the trunk. "Why'd you get so close." It doesn't sound like a question. It sounds like something else.

She squints at the sinking sun. "It was *tiny*."

Returning to her side, he takes hold of her hand. "I told you to never get that close."

They start walking the promenade. She decides she'll make a last-ditch effort to turn the blame on him, even though she knows he's looking out for her. "You don't tell me what to do."

"No," he says, "because you know what to do."

"So what's the problem?"

"You're being careless."

"You're being paranoid."

He breathes out, thumb brushing her wrist while they pass by the old condos and shoddy beach houses. "Yes, because you're scaring me. I

don't know why you won't just stick to the gun."

"We're within city limits!" she argues, but there's a playfulness simmering under her words. "And I don't think I need to remind you whose idea this was."

"We didn't come here to get hurt."

"I know that. I'm not gonna let anything hurt us, Jonathan. I'm not."

With that, he lapses into silence. She's not sure where they're going but she follows his lead all the same, making sure not to let go of his long, warm fingers. It would be easy to trick her mind into thinking they're on a different kind of trip, if only the streets weren't so empty. There's no official order to stay home, no curfew either, but people are afraid of being out at night. Especially in this area. Even they know they're being fed lies.

"Come here, Nance," he mumbles and tugs her aside on the boardwalk. When she notices the public showerhead, her heart jumps. She can't wait to get all of the grime off herself.

Eagerly, she pulls off her tennis shoes and her socks. He hands her the hose attachment. The water is ice cold, but as it runs down her leg, it restores her energy.

She feels his hand sneak under the short sleeve of her shirt, tracing the lengthy scrape there. "What's that from?"

Washing the dried blood off her arms, she shrugs away from his touch. “Nothing. It was that chain link fence. I fell back into it, and it was torn. I’m fine.”

He sighs a heavy sigh that clearly translates to a resounding *I don’t believe you.*

Once her skin is mostly free of dirt, she peels off her shirt and turns on the shower. “There’s no chance you grabbed our soap, is there?”

He comes up behind her, out of the spray. “I can do better than that,” he gives her a small shampoo bottle, “hold this.” Before she registers what’s happening, his hands are in her hair, massaging the product into her dirty curls as if *that’s* something they normally do together.

Blushing, she holds her elbow and tries not to rock on her feet. “What...what’re you doing?” she asks through a poorly suppressed smile.

His fingertips move through her wet hair. Graze her sensitive scalp. “Washing your hair,” he murmurs.

She gets goosebumps. “No, you’re doing something.”

“No, I’m not,” he says. “God, how’d you get all of this in here?”

She sighs in pleasure. “I don’t know,” she leans back against his chest, getting soap and water all over him, “but maybe I should do it more often.”

He gives a soft laugh and steps back. “Okay, okay. Chill out. We’re running out of dry clothes as is.”

They finish up with the shower, and he reluctantly joins her when she changes right there, in the wide open. Granted, *no one* is around.

“So, what’s the plan? Staying?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“And sleep where?” They’d made a deal that they would sleep in his car half the nights, spend money on a real bed for the other half. But the places here would be too expensive.

He pulls on a clean, dark shirt. “The beach.”

She laughs. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a public beach.”

His crooked smile lifts her spirit. It seems he's already forgiven her. "Except the public isn't here."

She thinks on it for a moment. She hasn't seen the ocean since she was a baby. She doesn't think Jonathan ever has. "Well, I guess the police *are* pretty busy right now. They probably wouldn't be too worried about us."

"I don't think they would," he says quietly.

"Okay then," she picks up their backpack, "beach it is. Since when are you the rebellious one?"

They walk down the boardwalk. Past the patches of grass and sea oats and dunes. When they reach the sand, it's cool. Greyish in the low evening light.

He's already digging out his camera.

She pulls the towels from his arms, spreading them out a little ways away from the shore. She sits down, and he kneels. Checks the back of the camera for film, chewing on his lip like he always does. His eyes are sweet and aware and sharp before he lifts the viewfinder to them. She barely hears the shutter over the roar of the ocean. The wind.

Pulling a jacket out of their bag, she looks ahead. It's no Hawkins view.

The sun is steadily going down. There's a sheer, sheer blanket of grey clouds in the sky. The colors beneath it easily show through. Red-orange and gold and purple visible in their sparse, cottony cover, casting a warm glow over the beach. Thin lines of orange cut through the water for a split second in a million different places, all glittering but not simultaneously. Flickers of light just out of sync. She's shoving her arms through the jacket sleeves as she studies the horizon. Going on forever and ever. She thinks about what could be out there and, surprisingly, her mind doesn't go to monsters. For once, it lets her linger in that safe *I wonder* phase.

Her eyelids fall closed then. She smells seaweed and sulfur and salt. Hears the waves rising. Curling over themselves until the crashing point. They rush onto the shore then leave a shallow layer of brine there, which retreats back into it all, slow and lazy before the next crash comes.

When she looks back to Jonathan, his lens is pointed at her.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Shy for no reason except that this feels too romantic. But not *their* kind of romantic. Like them covering each other when they're battling an interdimensional animal. More like the regular kind. Boyfriend and girlfriend watching a sunset.

"Wait, no. Turn back, Nancy. It looks perfect." His voice sounds so serious it makes her want to cry. Or something. So she turns. Even though she wants to hold him, be held by him, she turns. It will be dark soon. She'll give him this picture.

Examining the ocean again, she takes a deep breath. Her chest is tight, an unexpected surge of emotion seizing her heart. He was worried today, about her being careless. She gets it. She could never part with the feelings he gives her. She wants it forever. Him forever.

She watches him lower the camera in her peripheral vision. "D'you get your shot?" she asks gently.

Carefully, he wedges it back into the pocket of their backpack. "I got it."

"Okay," she scoots closer to him on the fleecy towel while he sits, "good." Pressing a kiss to his mouth, she curves her palm over his solid shoulder. He shifts, knee bending. His nose nudges hers. And he kisses back. In the deliberate, delicate, leisurely way he always does when she's stressed out or has a nightmare or he just wants to tease her. It goes on for a while. Until there's a light polish of sweat on them, their thoughts are blurry, and their heart rates are too high.

"You know, I was thinking...I wouldn't hate it if we went on a trip just to...go on it."

He licks softly at the seam of her lips, fingers clutching the thick fabric of the hoodie at her side. "You mean one where you don't bring the gun?"

She pulls away a little. Leans back in to lay her head on his shoulder. "Yeah. What do you think?"

He watches the dark waves breaking. The sun is gone. She starts to rock back and forth, barely. He mimics her movement. "I think...if you're there, I wanna be there with you."

3. kiss prompts - 3, 45

Notes for the Chapter:

this one takes place right after season two

#3: A breathy demand “kiss me” and what the other person does to respond

#45: Kisses exchanged as they move around, hitting the edges of tables or nearly tripping over things on the floor before making it to the sofa, or bed

It's a little exhausting. When nothing ever works out the way you wish it would, and you start to feel like you've done something very wrong in the eyes of the universe.

Because this—her pointless National Honor Society obligation falling on the exact day that Jonathan is finally coming back to school—is proof that the higher powers hate her.

And she misses him like hell. He feels further away than she can comprehend. Off on the most deserted island. Or maybe Saturn.

It shouldn't be such a big deal. It really shouldn't, but she knows the chance of them working out is time-sensitive. He pushed her away once, and given the time, he will do it again. He said he wouldn't. She knows he might.

When...

When he hears people *talking* about them, he will. Because they'll make him feel like he's too much for her. And not enough. All at once. And in the case where he doesn't care what they think, he still cares what they say to her.

The thought of that, the thought of their classmates intruding into this delicate thing she has with him, is why she's come here. She's not gonna let *pests* ruin this.

His car is here. And that makes sense, because it's midnight. It's Wednesday at midnight and he's here and she's here and she probably shouldn't be. His whole family must be so tired.

But his bedroom is lit, glowing like fire behind his window. To say the *least*, it's inviting. The thought of him there as she stands in the pitch-black cold. She just wants to get inside and be with him.

She knocks on the front door, only loud enough for him to hear.

She pictures his face contorting at the sound. Pictures his furrowed brow and bitter pout. Her nerves recede like a wave on the beach; she can't wait to see him. It's been ten days since she last did. Since she held his hand and they burned a virus, an otherworldly virus, out of his baby brother.

The lock clicks as he opens the door, and when he looks at her, it's like he's seen an angel. An insomniac, desperate angel.

“Nance,” he whispers, “are you—”

“I’m okay, nothing’s wrong. That’s not why I’m here.”

She takes in the sight of him. Or the sight of his silhouette, really. (The porch light is off.) But the silence quickly becomes awkward.

“Uh, what are you doing here, then?”

What is she doing here? What is she doing here? It’s a relief when she thinks of something to say.

“Well I heard Will tell Mike you guys were both coming back to school tomorrow.” Her tone is strangely casual.

She *feels* more than sees the bewilderment on his face. Feels him blinking at her, trying to read her body language. That’s when she realizes she didn’t answer his question, so she continues.

“And the thing is I won’t be. At school, tomorrow. So that’s what I was thinking. I mean, I know it’s late, but that’s what I was thinking when I came here.” She shifts her weight and curses the world once more in her head. Surely, she used to be better at this. But she supposes she’s never done *this*. This is trying to get under Jonathan Byers’ sheets at 12am. It’s a first.

“I...”

She gives a shallow sigh, not knowing what to expect from him.

“I’ve missed you, too,” he confesses. “So much.”

Oh. Did he step closer to her? *Oh*.

She leans into him, imperceptibly. Sways barely forward and thinks about his touch and his warmth.

“Yeah, I missed you,” she murmurs, “guess I coulda just said that.”

“Yeah...”

“So we miss each other. So,” her hands touch his and he looks down at that, “kiss me.”

No, that wasn’t what she meant to—

He covers her lips with his carefully then releases them with a soft *tsk*. A couple light kisses follow, so much softer and slower than the ones they exchanged in Sesser, but not unlike them in warmth.

And it’s kind of exciting: that now, she can tell him to do that, and he will. But she really hadn’t meant to command like that. To say it aloud.

Her nose bumps against his and he smiles. The feel of his grin by her mouth is one of the best things she's ever experienced. She bites her lip to contain her own smile and pecks the groove in the skin beneath his nose. He laughs. It's a really cute laugh. She can't remember if she's heard him laugh that way before, breathy yet relaxed and happy. Mostly uninhibited.

Then—

He leans in again and does something very nice and very subtle with his tongue (who the hell taught him to kiss?), and the sound she makes is a little too animalistic for a 17-year-old girl. He doesn't seem to mind.

"Gonna invite me in maybe?" she asks, breathing hard.

He tugs hard with his hands on her hips. "Come on."

She's pulled into the heat of the house and the heat of his chest. She thinks about the last bed they were in and is glad that this mattress will be *Jonathan's* and not some dirty one belonging to a stranger. A stranger whose help she was grateful for but whose laundry habits she had to question.

Not that the dust stopped them from anything.

She pushes her fingers deep into his hair as they walk, then she feels a pang of pain in her ankle as she almost rolls it on something. She yelps, his hands keep her steady, and there's that peaceful laugh again.

"I'm sorry," he kisses her neck, "I'm really sorry, we haven't cleaned. The floor's a mess."

Her face goes hot as he hugs her waist, and she looks down beside her feet. It was some sort of bulky rope toy.

"Since when do you have a dog?"

"We used to. We rescued him. C'mere."

He distracts her with more kisses as he moves them across the room and to the hall, guiding her. He's never seemed confident like this. Where does it come from? Is it because they're at his house? Because he has the advantage of knowing where on the floor random things may be waiting to trip you? Whatever it is, it's dangerous. If he keeps it up, she'll probably tell him she loves him or something.

(She'll want to tell him that anyway. She wanted to when they slept together, and he was not very confident at all. They were both nervous wrecks that night.)

As they linger in the hallway, inching along the wall, their kisses feel like conversation. Like he actually uses them in place of words he

doesn't want to say to her. It doesn't bother her. The conversation is a good one. With the way he doesn't let himself bite her lip without licking it afterward, to soothe it. With the pauses he takes because otherwise they get seriously overwhelmed. With the boyish groans that he tries very hard to tone down. His kiss is unique and vulnerable. It makes her certain that she never wants anyone else in the world to ever think about kissing her again. Just like she doesn't want anyone to kiss him.

They eventually enter his room, where there's light. They practically fall on the bed, too eager. His hair's in his eyes. His mouth is shiny with her spit and his expression is a little dopey. Hers must be, too.

"Jonathan."

"Yeah?"

"You would have still kissed me a minute ago if I hadn't told you to, right?"

He considers the burning question. "I would've gotten around to it," his lips press on her jaw, "would you have sprained your ankle if I hadn't been holding onto you?"